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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 TEL AVIV 006673

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SUBJECT: "KADIMA" ATTRACTING CROSS-SECTION OF POLITICAL SPECTRUM

REF: TEL AVIV 6624

1. Summary: Prime Minister Sharon continues to court national and local politicians from across the political spectrum to join his new party, "Kadima." Former Labor Party Leader Shimon Peres is considering whether to join Sharon and is to announce his decision on November 30. Sharon currently heads a Cabinet shrunk to 12 members, divided evenly between Likud and Kadima ministers. He is waiting until the official December 8 publication of the presidential decree to dissolve the Knesset, at which time he will be permitted to appoint new ministers without Knesset approval. End Summary.

2. Kadima Attractions

-- In the end, Prime Minister Sharon reverted to the name "Kadima" ("forward"), for his new centrist party, and officially registered it as such on November 24.

-- Sharon held his first meeting of the Kadima faction November 28 in the Knesset.

-- Sharon currently has 16 MKs in his party: himself, 13 other Likud MKs (see reftel), former Am Ehad MK David Tal, and former National Union MK Michael Nudelman. Pursuant to Israeli law, MK Chaim Ramon, who announced that he is leaving the Labor Party to join Kadima, can join Kadima only after the elections.

-- Former Labor Party leader Shimon Peres is considering whether to leave the Labor Party and join Kadima. Sharon reportedly is offering Peres a ministerial position to address the peace process in some capacity. A close associate of Peres told Israel Radio November 28 that Peres is likely to join Kadima and will announce his decision November 30.

-- Sharon met with Uriel Reichman, a founder of the Shinui Party and head of the Herzliya Interdisciplinary Center, about joining Kadima. A move by Reichman would be a serious blow to Shinui leader Tommy Lapid whose 14-MK faction stands to be reduced in the coming election.

-- Israeli Arab Mayor of Kfar Qassem Sami Issa confirmed to the media that Sharon's associates are holding talks with political figures in the Arab sector to persuade them to join Kadima. Issa has not announced whether he will join Kadima.

-- Sharon invited some 70 Likud mayors and a number of Labor Party and independent mayors to his residence on November 29 as part of his campaign to recruit new members for his party.

3. Transition Government

-- The December 8 official publication of the presidential decree to dissolve the Knesset starts a 21-day clock during which an absolute majority of MKs (61) can request that the President charge one MK with the task of forming a new government. In the unlikely event that a single MK could garner sufficient support to forward such a request, the MK so charged has 28 days to form a new government. If no such candidate emerges, the Knesset dissolves at the end of the 21-day period.

-- According to the November 23 agreement between President Katsav and Knesset members (reftel), as of December 8, Sharon can appoint from among Knesset members ministers to fill the eight slots vacated by the Labor Party. Sharon may choose not to fill two of the Labor slots, that of minister-without-portfolio, which has been held by Chaim Ramon, and that of vice premier, which had been created especially for Peres. Any new appointments require only Cabinet approval. The Cabinet now consists of six Likud ministers and six Kadima ministers.

-- Sharon granted himself additional ministerial portfolios for the next two weeks, until he appoints new ministers from his Kadima party. Sharon serves as minister for National Infrastructure, Communications, Interior, Housing and Construction, Environment, Science and Technology, and Social Welfare.

4. Pre-Election Political Dynamics

-- The National Union and National Religious Party are

discussing the possibility of a merger, with negotiations to begin this week. The National Union currently has six Knesset seats and the NRP has four.

-- The chairman of the left-wing Meretz-Yahad Party, Yossi Beilin, announced at his party's convention November 27 that Meretz would consider joining a coalition with Sharon if Sharon forms the next government.

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